

VARUNAN, THE GOD OF THE LITTORAL REGION

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The part of the R̥g-veda that speaks of Varuṇan is composed in West Punjab in between 1200-1000 B.C.¹ The contents of that part of R̥g-veda are as follows : The word Varuṇan means 'pervading one'. Air is considered to be the breath of Varuṇan. He punishes the immoral people by tying them with his rope and finally forgives them. He is the presiding deity of the water-spots. He prevents the sea from filling up though many rivers flow into it². Varuṇan holds the position of a presiding deity in the Vedic period. In Puranic age he was degraded to the positions of the chief of the sea and rains, guardian deity of the western direction and one among the twelve Adityas (luminaries).

TirumurukaaRRuppaṭai and Paripaṭal mention him as the guardian deity of the western direction and one among the twelve Adityas³. Tolkaappiyam refers to him as the God of the littoral region⁴.

Some are of opinion that the Tamils borrowed Varuṇa from Vedic Aryans and worshipped him with their local rites while others hold the view that the Aryan and Dravidian Varuṇas are of independent evolution and there is every possibility for the amalgamation as in the case of Murukan and Kartikeyan. But we can ascribe both the name of Varuṇa and his worship to Dravidian origin. Nowhere in Sangam literature except in Tolkaappiyam the God of littoral region is mentioned by the term Varuṇan. That too has the variant reading as Vaṇṇan (literally 'the coloured one')⁵. The blue colour is the striking feature of the sea. So, the Tamils derived the name of the littoral God from 'Vaṇṇam' the Tamil word for colour⁶. There are evidences in Sangam literature to the naming of Gods by their colours⁷. The Vedic Aryans freely borrowed the words of Dravidian origin. R̥g-Veda bears testimony to such loan words⁸. Likewise Gods of Dravidian origin also must have been incorporated in the Vedic pantheon. Varuṇan is considered to be one among them. The following passage of P. T. Srinivasa Ayyangar is worth quoting in this context : ".....The gods of the second group (Varuṇa, Rudra, Tvashta and Aditi) seem to have been taken over from the Dravidian speaking tribes of India. It has been already pointed out that the Dravidian languages profoundly affected the Vedic language, similarly the gods worshipped by the tribes that gradually accepted this language must have been 'Aryanized' and adopted the Vedic pantheon. Those Vedic gods the etymology of whose names is not patent and who have no analogues in other Indo-Germanic dialects must have been Indian gods to whom such treatment was accorded"⁹.

The God of the littoral region is mentioned by the following terms in Sangam literature : kaṭalkeḷu kaṭavuḷ, kaṭal teyvam, pukaart teyvam and apaṇku¹⁰. Kaṭalan (literally 'he who owns the sea') the name of the chief of Viḷakkil is suggestive of his being named after Varuṇan.¹¹

Kaṭalkeḷu celvi is the only reference in Sangam literature which refers to the God of sea in feminine gender¹². This may be due to the influence of Buddhism. Buddhist Jataka tales like Sangha-Jataka and Mahajanaka-Jataka speak of Maṇimeekalai as the guardian Goddess of sea who saves the virtuous men from shipwreck. According to Cilappatikaaram and Maṇimeekalai the munificent ancestor of Koovalan was rescued from the sea by Maṇimeekalai at the command of Igirai¹³. The phrase kaṭalkeḷu celvi may also be interpreted as Tiru, the Goddess of wealth, who came into existence while churning the ocean of milk on which Tirumaal reclines keeping her on his chest¹⁴.

Paṭṭinappaalai mentions the guardian angels of the sea who saved the ships that brought the horses, from shipwreck¹⁵. Toṇṭaimaṇ Paṭṭireiyan is said to be a descendant of the dynasty originated from the sea.¹⁶

The ninth verse of PuRaṇaanuuRu speaks of the festival of sea celebrated by Paaṇṭiyan neṭiyoṇ who lived before the submergence of PakRuḷi river in the sea. According to the old commentary this festival was celebrated in favour of Varuṇan, the God of the sea¹⁷. The worship of Varuṇan by the fishermen is portrayed well in Paṭṭinappaalai. On a full-moon day the men of the littoral region took rest from fishing and enjoyed themselves with their women companions. At first they planted the upper jaw-bone of the pregnant swordfish (a variety of shark) on the sands of beach to represent the sea-god Varuṇan. Then they installed and invoked the spirit of Varuṇan upon the jaw-bone. They wore the upper jaw-bone of the swordfish with the flower of taalai and offered palmyra toddy. Then they themselves wore and drank the same oblations offered to Varuṇan¹⁸. AkaṇaanuuRu refers to the worship at the bathing ghat on a full-moon day in which the ladies of the seaport town of KoṚkai dropped pearls and dextral conch-shells into the sea¹⁹. According to Naccinaarkkiniyar the ladies of the littoral region used to give oblations like these to Varuṇan when there was a fall in the catch of fish. Varuṇan heaps up the sands towards the land to avoid the coast erosion by the sea²⁰. The swearing of lover by the name of the God of sea is also found in Sangam literature²¹.

The worship of Varuṇan in the planted upper jaw-bone of the swordfish is pointed out only in Paṭṭinappaalai²². Other Sangam works do not mention about this. But they speak elaborately of the other aspects of the swordfish. The flesh of the swordfish was much relished by the inhabitants of the littoral region²³. The fishing nets get torn by the brute force of the swordfishes²⁴. They also used a lance for spearing this kind of fishes²⁵. Fishermen wounded by the swordfishes kept themselves away from fishing till they got cured²⁶. As a measure of precaution, pearl-divers kept the swordfishes away from the pearl-fishery²⁷. The swordfishes and the crocodiles frequent the back-waters²⁸. The swordfishes even wounded the horses that drew the chariots of the heroes along the seashore²⁹. The swordfishes are compared to the

swordsman and their sword like upper jaw-bones are compared to the serrated leaves of the taalai shrub³⁰. From these descriptions we can infer that it is natural for the fishermen to represent the sea-god Varuṇan in the upper jaw-bone of the swordfish, strongest marine product known to them.³¹ Apart from this general suggestion there must be a more strong and particular reason for adoring the upper jaw-bone of the swordfish. The inter-relation between swordfish and Varuṇan is not clearly stated in the Sangam literature. Therefore we have to rely upon the later literature to solve this problem. Later literature has the tendency to speak elaborately of the short accounts given in the early literature. Ottakkuuttar's (12th century A. D.) Takka-yaakapparani clearly points out the shark as the vehicle of Varuṇan³². The same belief must have been prevalent in Sangam age also. That is why the upper jaw-bone of the swordfish was used to worship Varuṇan. Even other Gods were represented by their respective vehicles at worship³³. The Sanskrit tradition ascribes the crocodile vehicle to Varuṇan. As far as we know the statue of Varuṇan is not available in any temple in Tamilnadu. There is a temple for him in Bali Island.³⁴

Greeks and Romans supplied their sea-gods with fish. Greeks worshipped Poseidon as their sea-god. In art he appears with the attributes of the trident weapon, dolphin and tunny fish. He was believed to dwell in a place in the depths of the Aegean. Marble statue of Poseidon from Melos, belonging to the second century B. C. is kept in the National Museum, Athens.³⁵ Neptune was the sea-god of Romans. He also appears with the trident and dolphin.³⁶

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3. Muruku 160, Pari 8:7, Muruku 167, Pari 3:6 PatirRu 72:12, 62:6.
4. Tol. Akattiṇai 5
5. Ilakkuvanaar, S. Tolkaappiyam with critical studies, KuRa! NeRi Publishing House, Madurai 1963 p. 384.
6. Tol. kiḷaviyaakkam 26, Aiñ 34:3-4, KuRu 110:5-6, KuRi 114 Perum 30, Pari 3:88 The word vaṇṇam denotes colour in Tolkaappiyam and Sangam literature. Naci-naarkkiniyar differentiates vaṇṇam from varuṇam and considers the former as of Tamil origin. See his Commentary on Tolkaappiyam : PuRattiṇaiyiyal 27 and Collatikaaram kiḷaviyaakkam 58.
7. PuRam 56:1-8, Kali 26:1-8, 104:7-147, 105:9-18
Special mention may be made to the following names of Gods derived from colours : maayoon (the black one - Maturaik 591), ceeyoon (the red god-PuRam 56:8), ceyyool (the red goddess-Pari 2:31) and vaaliyoon (the white one-PuRam. 56:12)
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10. NaR 358:6 Kali 131:1 Akam 110:4 Paṭṭinap 86-87 Akam 207:1, 240:8-9.
cf. "eRimunnir aaliveentanaam varuṇan"-Pariyaṭṭapāraṇam: Veljaanaic carukkam: 51.
11. Akam 81:11-13.
12. Akam 370:9-16.
13. Cilap 15:21-39, Maṇi 29:14-31.
14. Tiruvaacakam 6:37, Pari 2:31, Perum 29-30, Pari 13:26-29, 3:33-34
15. Paṭṭinap 184-185
16. Perum 29-31,37
17. PuRam 9:9-11; See the old commentary.
18. Paṭṭinap 78-93
19. Akam 201:4-9
20. Tol. Akattiṇai 5. See Naccinaarkkiniyar's commentary.
21. NaR 358:4-7, Akam 320:11-14, Kali 131:1-2, Cilap. 7: (5), (51)
22. Paṭṭinap 86-87, Periyapuraṇam : Tirukkuṛippuṭi toṭṭaṇaayanaar Puraṇam: 7.
23. NaR 111:6-9, Akam 10:10-12, PuRam 399:5
24. Akam 340:18-21, NaR 215:9-12, 303:9-12
25. KuRu 304:1-4
26. KuRu 269:3-4
27. Akam 350:10-11, 170:11.
28. Akam 80:1-2, NaR 67:7
29. Akam 190:11-17, 120:10-13
30. PuRam 13:7, NaR 19:2
31. KuRu 304:4 NaR 49:5, 19:2 Kali 131:7 NaR 111:7 Akam 187:31, KuRu 269:3,
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32. Takkayaakapparaṇi 456, 491, 499
33. Muruku 247, Cilap. 9:9, 5:143, 12:44
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35. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* vol. 18, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.*, U. S.A., 1967
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36. *ibid.*, vol. 16 p. 226